Gothic Literary Studies

Welsh Gothic

Jane Aaron

University of Wales Press

WELSH GOTHIC

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Jane Aaron

UNIVERSITY OF WALES PRESS
CARDIFF
2013

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www.uwp.co.uk

British Library CIP Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7083-2607-7 (hardback
978-0-7083-2608-4 (paperback)
e-ISBN 978-0-7083-2609-1

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Typeset in Wales by Eira Fenn Gaunt, Cardiff
Printed by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

Contents

Acknowledgements vii

Prologue: 'A Long Terror' 1

PART I: HAUNTED BY HISTORY

1 Cambria Gothica (1780s–1820s) 13

2 An Underworld of One's Own (1830s–1900s) 50

3 Haunted Communities (1900s–1940s) 84

4 Land of the Living Dead (1940s–1997) 108

PART II: 'THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE CELTIC TWILIGHT'

5 Witches, Druids and the Hounds of Annwn 139

6 The Sin-eater 170

Epilogue: Post-devolution Gothic 201

Notes 211
Select Bibliography 237
Index 251

Acknowledgements

This book owes its origins to those undergraduate students of English at the University of Glamorgan who in the mid-2000s were failing to sign up in sufficient numbers for an optional second-year module on Welsh writing in English. Though the first- and third-year modules on more contemporary Welsh writing were well supported, the second-year option, which dealt with the so-called 'first flowering' of Anglophone Welsh writers, and included on its syllabus such luminaries as Caradoc Evans, Dylan Thomas and the 1930s industrial novelists, failed to appeal, and as a result was threatened with closure. As I sought to find ways of increasing the allure of the material, I noticed that those optional modules offered by the department which featured the Gothic genre were in each year regularly oversubscribed. It proved surprisingly easy to reshape the original module, broaden its chronological scope, and submit it for approval as a new course entitled 'Terror and the supernatural in Welsh writing in English'. Under that title it served to draw sufficient subscribers to satisfy the student numbers requirements of the university for the rest of my time at Glamorgan, but its teaching was somewhat hampered by the fact that there was little secondary critical material available on the topic. This book has been written with the aim of helping to fill that gap; it is dedicated, with gratitude and appreciation, to those students whose lively responses made my years of teaching at Pontypridd so pleasurable.

In preparing the volume for publication I have been much supported by John Koch and Diana Wallace, who both read through the first draft and made many very useful suggestions for amendments; I am much indebted to them both. I should also like to thank those friends and colleagues with whom I discussed various aspects of the book in progress, in particular Helen Phillips, Sarah Prescott,

Katriona Mackay, Kirsti Bohata, Huw Walters of the National Library of Wales, and the editor of the Gothic Literary Studies series, Andy Smith. The staff of the University of Wales Press, particularly Sarah Lewis, were also enthusiastically supportive of this project, and I much appreciated their professionalism and diligence.

For kind permission to quote from her poem 'The Zombie-makers' I am very grateful to Ruth Bidgood. Though they have since been revised, parts of the first chapter of this book first appeared in 'Haunted by history: Welsh Gothic 1780–1800', in Stewart Mottram and Sarah Prescott, eds, *Writing Wales, from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), and are used here by permission of the publisher.

To the class of EL2S013

Prologue

'A Long Terror'

'A long terror is on me' grieves Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Goch in his thirteenth-century 'Lament for Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, the Last Prince'. Llywelyn's fall in 1282 marked the close of the Welsh struggle to maintain independence in the face of the Anglo-Norman conquerors. The poet represents his prince's death as a trauma of such magnitude that it shatters his world, leaving no place of safety: 'There is no refuge from imprisoning fear / And nowhere to bide – O such abiding!' (*'Nid oes le y cyrcher rhag carchar braw; / Nid oes le y triger; och o'r trigaw!'*). Every aspect of his environment has been defamiliarized; even the diurnal cycle of nature seems in disarray: 'See you not the sun hurtling through the sky, / And that the stars have fallen?' (*'Poni welwch-chwi'r haul yn hwylaw'r awyr? / Poni welwch-chwi'r sŷr wedi'r syrthiaw?'*). Terror is the only appropriate affective response to such a traumatic loss of security and identity as the death of Llywelyn and the conquest of Wales entailed: 'When that head fell, men welcomed terror,' says the poet (*'Pen pan las, ni bu gas gymraw'*).[1] Early Welsh poetry is a long litany of such terrors: before the coming of the Normans, bards from the sixth century onwards recorded the invasive onslaughts of the Saxons. The anonymous ninth-century poem 'Stafell Gynddylan' ('Cynddylan's Hall'), for example, laments the sacking of Cynddylan's hall Pengwern, near modern-day Shrewsbury, and the slaughter of the chieftain and his retinue. Written in the voice of one of the few survivors, Cynddylan's

sister Heledd, the poem describes Pengwern as 'dark tonight, / with no fire, no candle', and asks, 'Save for God, who'll keep me sane?' (*'Stafell Gynddylan ys tywyll heno, / Heb dân, heb gannwyll; / Namyn Duw pwy a'm dyry pwyll?'*)[2]

It is no coincidence that early Welsh texts like these were rediscovered, published and translated into English for the first time during that epoch which also saw the birth of the Gothic as a literary genre. After the era of Enlightenment with its emphasis on rationality and its valorization of classically influenced literature, writers and scholars of the turbulent second half of the eighteenth century, rebelling against what was perceived as the emotional aridity and repressiveness of the 'age of reason', actively sought to re-engage with, and create, a literature capable of arousing strong affect, be it sentimental, sublime or terror-ridden. In 1765, Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto*, hailed as the founding text of the Gothic genre. A year earlier when Evan Evans (Ieuan Prydydd Hir) published *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Ancient Welsh Bards Translated into English* (1764) he was participating in a parallel new movement popularized by the immense success of Thomas Gray's 'The Bard' (1757), an ode supposedly sung by the last poet to survive Edward I's alleged extermination of the Welsh bards in 1282 after Llywelyn's fall. Within this Celtic revival movement, early Gaelic and Welsh poetry was seen as illustrative of the unrepressed vitality of pre-Enlightenment culture and as evidence that the Isle of Britain too had once been inhabited by 'noble savages', free of the artificial constraints of modern civilization. In Gray's ode, the Plantagenet conquerors are roundly cursed: the bards slaughtered by Edward rise again, 'a grisly band', to 'weave with bloody hands . . . / The winding sheet of Edward's race'; even the very landscape of Wales, its 'giant oak and desert cave', swear eternal revenge against the king.[3] From the last decades of the eighteenth century on, the undead voices of the pre-conquest past are frequently to be heard in Welsh and Anglophone writing from Wales, castigating not only Wales's conquerors but also their own descendants, the modern-day Welsh, found wanting in the appropriate spirit of resistance to foreign rule. The 'long terror' of ethnic annihilation persists in such texts, which constitute the core materials of Welsh Gothic as a specific branch of the Gothic genre – or so, at any rate, this book argues.

In recent years Gothic literature referring to the history of imperial conquests and resistance to such conquests has been categorized as participating in the expanding oeuvre of what has been termed 'postcolonial' or 'imperial' Gothic, first labelled as such in Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism 1830–1914* (1988).[4] To what extent it is appropriate to categorize Welsh culture in general as 'postcolonial' is a question which has by now been debated at some length, and the outcome is still undecided, particularly amongst historians.[5] Within literary circles, however, it has been accepted that the literatures of all countries which have been invaded, but have resisted absorption into the dominant imperial culture, are appropriate subjects for interpretations based on postcolonial theory. As William Hughes and Andrew Smith put it in their introduction to a special issue on 'Postcolonial Gothic' of the journal *Gothic Studies*,

> The rather simplistic and restrictive notion of what it is to be postcolonial that is still occasionally encountered in some circles – namely a blinkered consideration of nations and cultures only after the departure of the invasive power source – has thankfully been eclipsed for the most part by a broader reading that situates the onset of the postcolonial at the point in which the indigenous culture, with its power structures, has its integrity violated by external (cultural or physical) interference.[6]

When that primary experience of violation remains alive as a central trauma in the cultural memory of a people, postcolonial theory is considered a suitable tool with which to assess its impact and its cultural affects. Within a British Isles context, it is nowadays customary to analyse the rich wealth of Irish Gothic materials in terms of the long conflict between Ireland and England,[7] and by now Kirsti Bohata, Darryl Jones and others have already embarked upon the process of extending such interpretations to Welsh Gothic writing.[8] Such an approach also frequently draws on psychoanalytic theory, and in particular on Freud's analysis of 'the return of the repressed', to explore the way in which the past colonial trauma, never fully surmounted, emerges in the text to 'uncanny' effect.[9]

While the insights afforded by postcolonial and psychoanalytic theory underpin this book throughout, the dominant methodology employed in the pages which follow is, however, more historical than theoretical. In mapping out the terrain of Welsh Gothic over two centuries in an introductory study of this type, maintaining a historicist perspective helps to keep in view the specificity of the Welsh experience and thus of the literature to which it gave rise. Recent criticism has argued for the importance of a historical approach in assessing Gothic literature. In *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction*, Robert Mighall defines the Gothic as 'a rhetoric', 'an attitude to the past and the present'. 'Epochs, institutions, places and people are Gothicized, have the Gothic thrust upon them', he argues; 'That which is Gothicized depends on history and the stories it needs to tell itself.'[10] The history that an imperialist, colonizing culture needs to tell itself often involves representing the indigenous people of a conquered domain as darkly 'other' and barbaric in order to rationalize their domination. The colonized can, however, retaliate by themselves making use of the Gothic mode to protest against the barbarities of their subordination. Alternatively, rather than resisting the powerful invading culture they can identify with it, interiorizing its representations and portraying their own people as primitive and demonic. But in a reverse swing, writers of the imperial culture can also rebel against its dominant values and 'go native', changing sides ideologically and identifying with the colonized. As we will see, all four of these fundamentally opposed but often unstable perspectives, which can shift within a text as well as from author to author, find representation within that body of literature which uses Gothic materials and is located in Wales.

In the first part of this book, four chapters explore Welsh Gothic writing from its beginnings in the last decades of the eighteenth century to the date of the second Welsh devolution referendum in 1997, with two chapters devoted to the nineteenth century and two to the twentieth. The first chapter focuses on the Romantic period, during which a shared preoccupation with history, whether it be in the form of national or familial history, or the story of ruined castles, abbeys and ancient remains, characterizes texts located in Wales. In particular, the focus is on past and present relations between the Welsh and the English, though the manner in which that history

is Gothicized varies according to the national perspective of the author. Welsh novelists tend to present their Welsh heroes and heroines as vulnerable innocents whose native virtue and integrity are threatened either by invading English gentry or by their enforced residence across the border in the 'devil's parlour', that is, London. But Welsh locations during this period also frequently provided the settings of so-called 'first-contact' Gothic novels,[11] written from the perspectives of travellers who on their first encounter with Wales were startled and sometimes alienated by its threatening landscapes, ruined castles and abbeys, and the perceived barbarities of its inhabitants whose very language spoke of a more primitive world.

That shock of otherness, particularly in relation to the language difference, was sharply felt in the middle years of the nineteenth century when the growth of industrialization brought to the attention of the entrepreneur and capitalist the fact that their potential workforce in Wales spoke little English. Education regulations which banned the speaking of Welsh in schools, along with the flood of incomers coming into Wales to labour in the new coal mines and iron and steel works, resulted in a 20 per cent drop, from 70 to 50 per cent of the population, in the number of Welsh speakers during the second half of the century. Many took it for granted that the Celt had entered the twilight zone, that the Welsh language would die and that Welsh culture would became merely a plaintive echo within English culture. The second chapter of this book argues that such assumptions incited the publication of a number of Gothic fictions prophesying the doom of the Welsh. But the threat to Welsh survival, along with the activating influence of the mid-nineteenth-century national independence movements in Europe and in Ireland in particular, challenged some of the Liberal leaders of Welsh life, who came to ascendance after the Liberal landslide of 1868, to establish in the 1880s a Welsh Home Rule movement, *Cymru Fydd* or Young Wales. Though it proved short-lived, the political movement was accompanied by a Welsh literary renaissance, some of whose members also evinced in their fictions an interest in clairvoyance and the occult movement, then burgeoning in Britain and the United States. Within that movement, certain aspects of traditional Welsh culture, such as Druidism and the association of the Grail legends with the early Celtic Christian church

in Wales, acquired new lustre. A culture previously presented as primitive and barbaric now featured as a source of transcendent light, particularly in the later fictions of Arthur Machen, to date the only generally acknowledged Welsh Gothic writer, whose work is also discussed in chapter two.

The popularity of the occult movement at the *fin de siècle* was related, of course, to the decline in Christianity following from the long-term effects of the revolution in ideas incited by the theories of Darwin and Marx. In the Welsh context the most striking changes of the first decades of the twentieth century included the rapid rise of socialism and the concomitant attacks on Welsh chapel culture. Both developments found expression in the literature of the period, some of it employing the Gothic mode. In the case of the chapels, the use of Gothic tropes for their disparagement was not a new development. During the second half of the eighteenth century, in the same period as that which saw the birth of the Gothic genre and of the Celtic revival, a series of Methodist religious revivals transformed Welsh communities, but faced Anglican disparagement, as a superstitiously primitive and barbaric form of worship which encouraged in its congregations over-enthusiastic and even licentious behaviour. In part as a consequence of this persecution, the preachers and deacons who led the chapel communities, which by the 1850s included 75 per cent of the Welsh population, defensively tightened their control on their congregations, initiating a system which began to be experienced as so oppressive by some of their members that, in the struggle to free themselves from the chapel's grip, they found it necessary to demonize Dissent. The third chapter of this book, on 'Haunted communities', examines early twentieth-century 'chapel' Gothic.

The second half of the eighteenth century also witnessed the dawn of the industrial era in Wales, with the development of the iron, slate, coal and, later, steel industries. The flare of the furnaces, the blackened landscapes, the miners descending in cages down the deep pit and the omnipresent possibility of sudden death became part of the image of Wales and lent themselves very readily to Gothicization. In the south Wales coalfield in particular the lack of opportunity to find employment as anything other than a coalminer (or his wife) created the sense of a doomed or haunted community,

sacrificed to the needs of Westminster and the British Empire. Chapter three also investigates those texts of the 1930s and 1940s in which the conditions of labour in the coal industry, and the very pits themselves, are represented as daemonic powers that drain the lifeblood of the workers and their families.

At the same time, as the census figures decade by decade inexorably registered the decline in Welsh-language speakers, the fate of the Welsh language and its culture remained a dominant concern. The horror of living through one's own cultural death is imaged in texts whose protagonists are represented as haunted by the princes and warriors of pre-conquest Wales risen from the dead to castigate the modern Welsh for their heedlessness and neglect of their language and culture. The fourth chapter of this book, 'Land of the living dead', explores the development of this postcolonial theme in an array of exemplary twentieth-century and contemporary Welsh- and English-language Gothic fictions. There is a grim vitality to these texts' use of the Gothic, a vitality in part drawn from and contributing to modern, global developments in the genre. But they had a specific political message for their first readers in twentieth-century pre-devolution Wales, warning them to heed their heritage and respect their distinctive ethnicity, lest the spirits of their forefathers return to haunt them.

In texts located in Wales but not necessarily written with Welsh readers in mind, such preoccupations with the past are often represented as but part and parcel of the characteristic superstition and backwardness of the indigenous population. Stressing the primitiveness of the Welsh in this manner allows Wales to feature as a suitable site for an array of Gothic extravaganzas, and it would be a failure of inclusion in a book on Welsh Gothic not to make some attempt to trace the literary history of at least a few of the figures drawn from Welsh folklore and superstition which are omnipresent in the genre. Accordingly, in the second part of this book, on 'Things that go bump in the Celtic twilight', the focus switches from Welsh history and the concerns to which it has given rise in Gothic writing to the evolution in literature of four such figures: the druid, the Welsh witch, the hounds of Annwn and the sin-eater. Witches are of course an ubiquitous and international feature of folklore, but their close association in Celtic myth with ancient mother goddess

figures renders them potentially more powerful and more ambivalent figures within Welsh Gothic than they are elsewhere: chapter five follows the literary representation of the Welsh witch in fiction, from the early years of the Gothic genre to the present day. Since the Romantic era, the druid has featured as an emblem of Welshness, closely associated with the Welsh bard, and living on as cultural leader through the institution of the eisteddfod; the continuing resonances of this enigmatic figure are also explored in this chapter, along with another phenomenon more specific to Welsh mythology, *cwn Annwn*, the hounds of the underworld that hunt the souls of the damned and herd them to hell.

The sixth chapter focuses on the arguably historical figure of the sin-eater, whose activities were first recorded in the seventeenth century. Through eating and drinking bread and beer passed to him over a corpse, the sin-eater was believed to take upon himself the sins of the dead; but as soon as the ritual was over, he was reviled as a scapegoat and driven away with curses and blows to live in isolation on the fringes of his community. From his first fictional appearance in the 1830s the Welsh sin-eater has featured in literature as an emblem of guilt and abjection, bearing in enforced solitude the crimes of others. Like the vampire, he later became deracinated, and the texts in which he currently appears are more likely to be American than Welsh. The Gothic element, however, still strongly predominates; the international sin-eater moves through his or her community isolated by the same aura of supernatural dread as that which surrounded him in his first Welsh appearances. His abjection has also been connected with postcolonial themes; his community projects upon him the self-hatred it experiences as a subjugated people.

In the post-devolution twenty-first century, however, some of the bitterest aspects of Welsh history have been healed. The conquered princes of the past less frequently haunt the pages of contemporary Welsh Gothic, in which the tropes of the genre are often humorously played with, to evoke laughter rather than horror. At other times more sombre themes prevail, as the Gothic is used to give expression to the contemporary fears of the post-industrial communities of south Wales and the continuing decline of the rural communities of the west and north, the Welsh-language heartlands.

In its epilogue, this book investigates such post-devolution strains within twenty-first-century Welsh Gothic.

A curious aspect of Welsh Gothic is its previous lack of critical recognition: according to the *Handbook to Gothic Literature* (1998), for example, Wales has contributed virtually nothing to the wealth of world literature in the Gothic genre.[12] Similarly, the 2002 *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, while it includes a chapter on 'Scottish and Irish Gothic', makes no reference to Wales. With the sole exception of Arthur Machen (who is categorized as 'British' in the *Cambridge Companion*),[13] no Welsh authors of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, it is claimed, concerned themselves with the task of reflecting in literature the national abundance of dark myth and folklore. Yet, the fact of the matter is that a trawl of relevant bibliographies and library catalogues will with relative ease result in a rich haul of literary materials that could arguably be categorized as Welsh Gothic. Why these texts have been ignored is in part due to the general neglect of Welsh writing, particularly of the nineteenth century; also, most of the critics previously active in the field have been more concerned with issues of identity, or with the need to develop a specifically Welsh literary history and canon, than with generic criticism. Yet, a focus on the Gothic by no means precludes explorations of national identity. A culture tends to Gothicize that which it most fears, and many of the fears encoded in Welsh Gothic are specific to the history of Welsh people. This book as a whole aims to demonstrate the fact that Welsh Gothic writing exists in abundance and that it has much to tell us about the changing ways in which Welsh people have historically seen themselves and been perceived by others.

PART I

Haunted by History

1

Cambria Gothica (1780s–1820s)

In Ann of Swansea's *Cambrian Pictures* (1810), the Honourable Captain Maitland, quartered with his regiment near Caernarvon, suffers a rough introduction to the terrors of wild Wales. While ostensibly courting Eliza Tudor, the heiress of Tudor Hall, his eye falls upon one of the household's domestics, the pretty dairy-maid Gwinthlean, whose virtue he covertly assails 'with all the united artillery of vows, promises and flattery'.[1] At length Gwinthlean promises to meet him at a red barn in the neighbourhood, but arrives there in a state of some affright; a suicide once hung himself from its rafters and since then local legend has it, she tells him, that the 'tefil haunts the parn'.[2] Reluctantly, she allows him to draw her into the building, but

> at the very moment the captain supposed himself on the verge of accomplishing his wishes, she burst from his arms with a loud shriek, and flew out of the barn. Captain Morland, astonished at this action, would have flown after her: but between him and the door stood a huge terrific black figure, with cloven feet, fiery eyes, and tremendous horns, which seized him in its strong grip, pinioned his hands behind him with an iron chain, threw him on his face, fastened his legs together in the same way, then swinging him across his shoulders, flew with him to the stables behind Tudor Hall, and stuck him up to his neck in a dunghill.[3]

Rescued from this predicament by Eliza and her father, 'the disappointed captain exhibited a most deplorable spectacle of mud and terror'; he protests to all and sundry that 'the devil himself in proper person' had 'caught him up and flew a long way with him in the air' and insists that two men from his regiment watch over his bed each night 'for fear of the devil paying him another visit'.[4] But once he has recovered, Maitland is inveigled into attending a local wedding where to his mortification he witnesses 'the rosy Gwinthlean' married 'to a tall, athletic fellow whom he had no doubt was the person who had performed the part of the devil at the red barn'.[5] After the ceremony Gwinthlean makes it public that it was at her husband Hoel Watkin's instigation that the assignment in the barn took place. 'He would wrap himself up in the hide of an ox, and cure you of trying to ruin innocent country girls', she tells the captain, who leaves Wales in some haste, and subsequently has to change regiments too, 'the unfortunate story of the devil and the dunghill' having 'pursued him to the parade and the mess-room'.[6]

Wales's reputation as a haunted land has in this fictional case served its inmates well by helping to rid them of an unscrupulous would-be exploiter. Encouraging the spread of local tales of terror in order to frighten away potentially threatening incomers was, apparently, in reality common practice in many areas of Wales at this time. Ghosts proliferated in particular in coastal spots frequented by smugglers or wreckers who had good reason to discourage strangers from lingering within sight of the coves and caves in which they operated. The Blue Lady of Dunraven and the ghost of the 'wrecker lord' Thomas Wyndham were both said to haunt Southerndown in Glamorgan, notorious as a wrecking village; the murdered Lady Stradling and the witch Mallt-y-nos inhabited nearby St Donat's Castle from which the Stradling family reputedly operated a flourishing smuggling trade; a witch called 'Old Moll' haunted the pointedly named Brandy Cove near Caswell Bay on the Gower peninsula, and a tribe of witches protected Llanddona in Anglesey, another reputed haven for smugglers.[7] In Wales as a whole, the abundance of folkloric tales of witches, devils, wizards, death portents, cursing wells, hell-hounds, haunted castles and the like suggests the possibility that what they represent may not simply be the superstition of the inhabitants, but their not necessarily conscious tendency

to discourage possible exploiters from entering their territory by portraying it as steeped in supernatural horrors. However, if that was indeed the case, by the close of the eighteenth century the device had backfired; the rising popularity of the Gothic genre meant that the darker elements in Welsh folklore were by now more likely to attract visitors to the country than to repel them. This chapter on the representation of Wales in Gothic writing from the 1780s to the 1820s begins with a section on the ways in which Wales was depicted by its late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century visitors, before moving on to examine the manner in which Welsh authors, in their turn, made use of Gothic devices to explore their relation with the ruling state, as visitors to England and as partners in the Wales-England union. The texts discussed in these first three sections are primarily concerned with the Wales of their time, but in its final section the chapter closes with an account of Gothic historical fictions located in Wales and written during the Romantic period.

Romantic tourists in Gothic Wales

Their taste fashioned by the prevailing vogues of the era, travellers to Wales at the close of the eighteenth century enjoyed the sublimity of its mountain scenery, the eerie majesty of its ancient ruins, and the picturesqueness of its unsophisticated inhabitants who according to their visitors still adhered to pagan superstitions. In *The Abbey of St Asaph* (1795) by the Anglo-Scottish writer Isabella Kelly (1758–1857), Lady Douglas, on a month's tour of Wales, informs her children as the Cambrian mountains rise 'with bold magnificence' into view striking the mind 'with pleasing awe' that these are the 'reputed regions of inspiration'. Formerly, she says, they were inhabited by druids who

> studying nature, and the effects of plants and herbs, completed many surprising cures; which in that darkened age were imputed miracles; in the more remote countries, the people still retain a large portion of their ancient superstition, attributing to certain springs very miraculous influence.[8]

The Abbey of St Asaph is a contemporary novel – Lady Douglas is the widow of an army officer who fought for Britain in the American War of Independence, but lost his life in a subsequent military campaign in the East Indies – but the superstitiousness of the Welsh peasantry is integral to the plot of this full-blooded Gothic fiction. The abbey, 'a Gothic, noble piece of architecture', fronting not only 'stupendous mountains' covered with forests of 'wild magnificence' but also the ruins of a castle 'tottering in superb decay', is reputedly haunted by at least two troubled ancestors of its proprietors, the Trevallion family. In former days when the castle yet stood 'strong' and 'fortified',

> Owen of Trevallion, the first of the race, and invested with it by one of the princes of Glendower, returning from a signal victory, found his wife Bertha folded in the arms of a lovely youth; and in a transport of jealousy plunged his sword in her bosom, and completed his vengeance by the death of the stranger, who with his parting breath exclaimed, 'I am her brother!'[9]

In bitter remorse, Sir Owen is said to haunt the scene of his fatal error, accompanied by his much later descendant Sir Eldred Trevallion, the brother of Sir Hugh, the present owner. Sir Eldred had reportedly committed suicide by 'dashing himself with fury' from one of the windows of his 'ancient pile' when his wife perished in his arms, two days after his return from an East Indian campaign in which he was mistakenly reported killed: his wife, prostrated by grief at the supposed loss, was too weak to endure the shock of his sudden return.

Though she is warned by the abbey's domestics and tenantry that its ruins echo to the 'groans and moans' of undead Trevallions, the novel's heroine Jennett takes pleasure at nightfall in wandering through the 'solitary mouldering' castle. Jennett is in service at the abbey as a companion to Sir Hugh's daughter, but – not entirely surprisingly – it is eventually disclosed that she is in fact Sir Eldred's long-lost daughter, Rodolpha Trevallion, the true heiress of St Asaph. On one of her moonlit rambles, 'enrapt by the sublimity of the scene', she loses herself in contemplation of the abbey's past. 'These are the haunts of meditation,' she thinks: